

Tomorrow Can take Care of Itself

A conversation with Jean Nouvel by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn

Introduction

Sören Kierkegaard once said:

'It is true what the philosophers tell us, that life can only be understood in retrospect. But they generally forget another law: that it can only be lived in a forward direction. It will be clear to anyone who thinks about this that life can never really be understood in the context of time, quite simply because I don't have a single moment of the peace I need to understand life in retrospect'.

With this statement he laid the foundations of Existentialism that would later be such a decisive influence on the philosophy of the 20th century. In the end the only things that count are one's acts. In this respect Jean Nouvel - who usually wears black - has proved himself a genuine Parisian. Few architects at present have been so eager to play the role of committed intellectual in the ongoing cultural debate, even if Nouvel's commitment is distinctly depoliticised. As an architect Nouvel is capable of talking back to the culture, and of presenting his work as something more than just an illustration of the culture. The high quality of Nouvel's discourse makes it a part of a cultural debate that is way above the normal level one gets in a highly specialised discipline like architecture. (Nouvel does however have the sense to realise that as an architect you had better not put on too many airs if only for reasons of tact and tactics.)

One of the subjects that Nouvel has repeatedly discussed is the supposed immaterialisation of architecture. That process, in his view, would not stop at Modernist achievements such as screen façades and structural steelwork but has continued through to the level of the meaning of the building itself which would eventually be no more than a climate regulating shell around the otherwise autonomous processes that go on inside. The front, once thought of as the boundary of the architectural object, is reduced to an interface between different modes of existence. There is no longer any inside and outside; in fact all the previous functions of the front have ceased to exist. We are in a permanent state of transition and the interface will limit any interruption in this flux to a minimum. In addition to his defence of this approach to the profession, Nouvel has also become involved in the discussion around the problem of the specialist in a culture that is undergoing the virtualisation of reality through modern technological media such as television, video, fax-machines, modems, etc., which lead to space and time shrinking till they eventually merge in an ultimate simultaneity. This development has enormous implications for architecture that has traditionally been understood as being the bringing together of space and materials in the context of time. In order to establish its position in this process it will have to give an explicit account of itself. A simple rejection is not the correct answer in Nouvel's view. This time of 'afterwards' demands a more subtle attitude. It is still a matter of thinking in stone (or in Nouvel's case, glass, that according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the most innocent of all stones). 'In a broad sense my audience is the public of my time; it has the same cultural background as I do, and I appeal to its spirit. I don't appeal to its eyes; that isn't interesting at all, but much more directly to its culture, to the realm of connotation in other words, to encourage it to ask questions about things'.

It follows that the virtualising of reality also has enormous implications for how we experience reality. It is no longer a hierarchical series of impressions registered by our eyes that gives a structure to our perceptions, but a continuous process of things which merge with each other or overlap, without one being able to deduce any moral from it. Architects are in a sense responsible for the environment and Nouvel regards his task as being to do justice to the new character of our experience of it. Nouvel's treatment of the entrance to a building is also distinctly culturally determined; he lays as little stress as possible on the physical transition between inside and outside, between public and private. Entirely in keeping with the relativising of every hierarchy, you never know precisely where you are as you follow your route through the building; nor, from an institutional point of view, do you know what you

are. You are caught up in Nouvel's circulation. In the end you come up against the problem of identity: in this virtual reality you no longer know who you are.

The thing that is striking about all these examples is not so much the programmatic will to change, or a directly institutional commentary within a specific project, but above all Nouvel's urge to create a specific post-historical atmosphere. Even though his architectural objects are often hard, even reticent, they have an aura that negates this hardness and reticence. They do not function as objects but as pieces of machinery, like Duchamp's bachelors' machines. What Nouvel is particularly concerned with is the aesthetic experience, the creation of a cinematic ecstasy in which space is reduced to pure emotion, prised loose from Cartesian geometry with its rational purposiveness, its soulless dimensions of length, width and height. Nouvel does not just want to manipulate these three dimensions; he wants to give people a scenario in the cinematic sense of the word that enables them to experience this compression of time. By doing this Nouvel has turned his fear of not being in tune with the times into a positive approach. To quote his own words: 'I get in a state of panic at the thought that I am not making good use of the possibilities of my time'.

This brings us back to the necessity for the act. With his increasing emphasis on practice Nouvel has chosen for a reconquest of innocence. His aim is to heal the Cartesian fissure. The dichotomy between subject and world, between words and things, a divide that modern French philosophers have presented with some emphasis as being unavoidable, can only be overcome by the existential act of life dirtying its own hands. The hyperconscious Nouvel would be only too pleased to lose some of his understanding of life.

Let's go straight to the point. If one leafs through any article about contemporary architecture, or goes to any symposium on the subject, the name Jean Nouvel is bound to crop up. How do you feel about that?

That's not my problem, though of course you function better when you know that a majority of people approve of what you're doing. I can't complain about that. People's reactions are fairly predictable: in the first phase the word provocation comes up. People don't understand what I am doing and accuse me of seeking a confrontation. Then there is a phase where I have to explain things to important discussion partners such as clients, administrators and politicians. Once the work of construction is completed you get another set of heated reactions; but the building hopefully will be its own best advocate.

I am certainly not looking for everyone's approval. My architecture is committed in the sense that it argues for a certain attitude towards the present. I expect to get reactions to this attitude, ideological ones and more directly sensory responses; I don't have any problem with them because the majority of them are favourable. The worst thing would be if there were no reactions at all; but I am not trying to elicit them. There is no sense in which I organise or orchestrate them. They usually come of their own accord; and that's something that I can feel satisfied about.

Who goes to make up your public?

Everyone, but above all the users, the people for instance who in the general way of things make use of the Institut du Monde Arabe or the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique as visitors or to work in these institutions. You don't choose a public like this; it is a fait accompli. Lovers of architecture form an additional public, but they are of secondary importance. Depending on the purpose of the building, there is bound to be a public. Everything else is secondary.

One of the most important themes of your writings, your interviews and, for that matter, your buildings is the need for architecture to be 'up to date', to keep abreast, that is, of current cultural developments. Why do you give this quality such a priority?

Because I think that architecture is not an autonomous discipline and that it is bound to reflect the culture of a period. It is the visible evidence of its own time and of the preoccupations and aspirations of its own generation. We can never do much more than bear witness to everything that stimulates, excites and gives pleasure to our own generation. I often think that we wouldn't understand anything about the Greeks or the Middle Ages if we didn't have their buildings. That is why I always try to keep up with what is going on. Not from day to day as in fashion, nor in terms of decades that the notion of 'design' seems so dependent on, but in the sense of responding to all the aesthetic and emotional values of a given moment.

But that also means that you have to be able to give a diagnosis of a period or a situation?

Yes, that's true; it means one must have a capacity for synthesis; you need both to be aware of what's going on and to be able to distance yourself. An architect, like a film-maker, should know how to take the correct distance, to survey the whole and be able to analyse the details. But isn't this true of all kinds of activity? What does a good rugby or soccer player do if not place himself above the field in order to survey the situation?

The difference is that you, don't just survey the situation, you also offer a pathology. Your work contains a certain view of historical destiny, a mixture of fantasy and apocalyptic elements.

The greatest difficulty is always first and foremost how you deal with historical destiny. There are certain facts that you can't get around, such as your historical and geographical circumstances. These are things that neither the will of a single person nor a local political decision can ignore. In our time, for instance, there is no longer any point in grumbling about the environmental chaos caused by the explosive growth of so many cities and suburbs. What's the point of complaining? That's just how things are. Nobody is going to pull everything down and erect, say, an 18th century city all over again. What I'm interested in is to try and see something positive in what is happening at the moment. Being an architect means choosing to be realistic. Otherwise you're not an architect at all; at best you can make nice designs for abstractions such as Human Beings and Ideal Space. They may even be very beautiful, but being an architect means that you have to be capable of building something in a given situation at a given point in time; you must be prepared to do this in the world that is what it is, with all its political, financial and technological limitations. That's always been my aim. When I see what is going on today, I tell myself: I have to make sure I'm operating in this context and that I'm making something that gives a meaning to that context. That is much more important than the building in itself. I think that an architecture that genuinely deserves to be called interesting always reveals the context, letting it be seen, rather than exploiting it so as to appear more important than it is. I think that this is a greater achievement than designing something that is in itself good but which completely ignores its surroundings. Once again I believe that the philosophy of architecture is a constructive and realistic one. As architects it is our job to make the world more liveable; a little more lucid and beautiful than it was before. This means practice.

Do you think that people can become freer as a result of their architectural surroundings; is there an architecture that can enable us to think more clearly?

It's my conviction that the only really worthwhile gift you can give anyone is the joy and pleasure that you communicate. If someone feels good in a building and thinks it is beautiful and wants to stay there or return to it and talks about it with his friends, then something is going on that is of real importance, something that can change people's experiences and ideas. One can speak of architecture as being real if by means of something tangible something is influenced in the mental realm. And I remain convinced that you can distinguish a true architect from a false as easily as anything: the true one is the one whose finished project is

always more interesting than his drawings and models. With the false one the reverse is true. He lets himself be carried away at the drawing board by all kinds of bright ideas, ideas that vanish as quickly as they appeared or else they fall flat as soon as they are tested against reality. A good building is always a hundred times more interesting than the photos and drawings.

If you talk about architecture having the power to change people's experiences and ideas, that suggests you are very optimistic. Do you agree?

In eternity all we are is little atoms and an architect's buildings only last a little bit longer than we do. The only hope an architect can have in my view is to make something permanent out of a set of emotions that belong to a very short-lived moment. The capacity for capturing or freezing the values concealed in a specific moment, that is the power of architecture. I love the fragility you get when something extremely fleeting is petrified. That is why I always work very hard at the different varieties of light in which my work can be seen: by daylight, in the evening, when it is raining or when the sun is shining, from a distance and close to, etc. Architecture for me is not a sort of cold geometrical object that you only allow to affect your reason. That's a complete mistake. The way you experience a building in these different situations is far more important. A building changes according to the weather. In Chartres when a ray of sunlight falls right through the arched windows or the rose window, the cathedral becomes ten times more alive. It's so simple: buildings are intended for certain moments, like the signs in a musical composition. Certain places were designed for certain events. Churches, for instance, are for spectacle, for theatre and choral singing. Every building should be the ideal place at least for some people in some situations at some moments in time. This is the fundamental nature of architecture that has any quality.

You're interested both in the direct sensations linked to a specific moment, and in an intellectual analysis of present day society. Which comes first with you?

This opposition is no secret. In my work I am an advocate of making use of every opportunity and every pretext. This means that I don't believe in any generalization, especially if it is a political one. Of course there is a larger context, but even so what you basically have to do is to forget every notion of a model to be followed, every trace of a conformist attitude. In my view this goes not just for architecture but for every profession, even politics. It is my view that we often have to prise ourselves loose from so-called political necessities. Fate is something that is over and above politics. Sometimes it can seem for a while as though it is political in character, but there are much stronger, more ineluctable bonds such as one's historical inheritance, technological development, etc., that weigh more. It isn't the architecture that makes a new world. Godard once said that he didn't have any idea of making a good film; he just wanted to make a film. This means that there is a moment when you just have to practice your profession and you cannot let all kinds of other considerations get in the way of it.

Isn't that being a bit naive?

Again it isn't a question of naivety but of fate. At a certain moment you get into a situation where you need some kind of general perspective in order to know that right here and now there is only one thing that you can do. In any case the idea that you might be able to change the world with a film, a building, etc., is pretty ridiculous. You have to be aware of how much influence you have and above all what its limits are.

Isn't there such a thing as being too aware?

No, that's never a disadvantage. You always need to have as much awareness as possible.

What is a mistake is to expect too much because you have too optimistic an estimate of the situation: yes, that's something that can have serious consequences, because it leads to being ridiculous, to pretentiousness, to something that no longer has anything to do with architecture. I repeat, the architect has a very simple problem. Nothing that I build is equal to how I imagined it, I'd be the first to admit that. As soon as I start, I put one foot carefully in front of the other till suddenly I feel the ground fall away. With one leg I'm still standing on solid ground. It's when you're in this position, with one foot on the ground and the other in empty space, that you're being a good architect. Sometimes you put both feet in space; that means the building won't be built. You fall flat on your face. A fiasco like that means your idea was too radical, too subversive, incomprehensible. Architecture continues to be the art form that depends on the greatest possible consensus. Perhaps the same goes for films. But compare this with a writer, a painter, a photographer. They do what they like! If we do what we like, we make a little drawing on a piece of paper, but that isn't architecture. In the same way a filmmaker can dash off a scenario but that doesn't mean he's made a film!

So far we have looked at your métier from the point of view of the artist. Can you also describe it from the institutional point of view of the commission that has to be realized?

The least you can expect from an architect who has his head screwed on is that he will respect the commission. Architecture has suffered a lot from things being produced that went right against any kind of reality, that had nothing to do with the world as it actually exists, as we experience it everyday. I don't think it's an insurmountable problem if some buildings have elements that don't quite make sense, for instance with regards to their upkeep. But they have to make sense for the people who have to live in them. I pay a great deal of attention to this. As far as participation is concerned I am an heir of May 68. The questions raised by the assignment should be discussed democratically. On the other hand I don't believe in creativity by referendum. That doesn't work.

How does something of outstanding quality come about? Is it the result of a series of brilliant decisions on the part of the architect?

I don't have a scrap of faith in intuition. I stick with the reality as long as possible before taking what I would call the creative leap. I also don't believe in inborn talent. Nobody is born with some fabulous gift or other. Maybe Mozart. Weren't the fairies supposed to have hovered round his cradle? Still less do I believe in brilliant scribbles that can conjure up something sublime. As though sublimity was something that could suddenly appear just like magic. What I do believe in is the possibility of the convergence of exceptional circumstances and a certain group of people. This can result in a crystallisation that is interesting because it bears witness to an age, to a specific sensibility, and also to the fleeting quality of the life that existed at that point in time. That is not very much, but it is also a very great deal!

Jean-François Lyotard said that we live in a society where sensitivity has taken the place of intelligence. Does your architecture relate more to this sensitivity than to intelligence?

I don't see any contradiction. You can be as sensitive as you want but the first condition for sensitivity is surely intellectual doubt. A person who never feels any doubt and never asks questions about anything, who thinks that everything will just land in his lap without any effort, what kind of sensitivity is that? Don't ask me. For me the acquisition of knowledge provides the material that enables sensitivity to emerge. I believe strongly, not so much in humility maybe, but at any rate in a sort of caution because in a craft like ours this is indispensable if you are to be able to stand up to reality. To me the word 'intuition' does not suggest hypersensitivity but rather a sort of undirected voluntarism.

Let's return to your analysis of society. You have given a full description of your own views. What do you think however about the possibility of achieving an ecological and social balance?

I hardly need to tell you that we live in a situation of balances that are constantly being upset. This is called dynamics. I don't have any belief whatsoever in restoring the balance by going back in time. What I do believe in is a permanent lack of balance while we search of something that lies ahead of us. As long as we put one foot in front of the other and don't fall flat on our faces. What's more, I am not particularly interested in all these ideologies that appear on the stage one after the other, the present ecological ideology, for instance, 3/4 of which consists of a somewhat suspect nostalgia. I have great faith in the future, but not in the sense of having unlimited time at your disposal or as a system of predictions. I never allow myself to forget that I am not building for tomorrow, but for today; even though I would love to live 5000 years later. That's just my nostalgia for the future.

You argued that a process of dematerialisation is taking place...

Yes, I have already been talking for fifteen years about dematerialisation in architecture. This also has to do with the development of new technologies, and the circumstances in which architects work. Right from the start people have tried to build as lightly and as simply as possible to shelter themselves against wind, cold and rain.

Seeing that gravity exists whether we like it or not, the architect's job is always to use the means at his disposal to make a structure that is as satisfying as possible, both in the relation between inside and outside and in terms of light. At one moment people want everything lit up and the next they want no light from outside to enter in. You can't have it both ways. It's my view that our possibilities have increased considerably this century. At the same time I think that modernity is a living concept whose content is in evolution. And I think that a building where the only idea is to show the structural reality will first and foremost be a boring building. I think that if a structure only invites you to say things like 'oh, what a beautiful pillar! oh, what a beautiful beam!', it is saying very little. As far as I am concerned I try to use less obvious means to make buildings that are thought-provoking or emotionally inspiring: symbolism, for instance, or the incidence of light, through their tangibility, how the rooms follow on from each other, the setting. For me these are the terms that belong to today and today's emotions.

But this concern with today's terms surely originates in a historical vision that also takes into account what is implicit in the present and where that is leading us. What's going to happen tomorrow?

In this sense the future is simply a dream about something that we can't possibly know for certain. I don't allow myself to imagine what I will think about my buildings in 30 years time. Time doesn't interest me, only the present moment. Every time people fancied that they were building for the future, they ended up with a flop. The same goes for all those plans for cities and neighbourhoods for 15 or 20 years time. I just said it a moment ago: we would do better to know what our limitations are. I do not think of my buildings as belonging to the future but as being as intelligent as possible and appealing to people's senses and feelings as effectively as is possible now. 'Tomorrow' can take care of itself. I can't possibly know what they will discover tomorrow, what wars will take place, what the social developments will be in the neighbourhood for which I am making this building. Its greatest chance of survival will be if I make it as relevant and meaningful as possible for now. Then maybe people will allow it to remain as a piece of evidence and they will even feel affection for it. That is all I can do. I have nothing to say about what will come after our time. I am not clairvoyant; if you want a fortune teller you should go to the fairground.

You were clairvoyant enough to foresee that 'the future of architecture will no longer be architectural'.

That's something I'm convinced about. I made nine tenths of all the architects in France furious when I said that, all the professors of architecture, whole schools of them! They think that architecture is buried away somewhere in the genes of the profession, in other words in its whole history. And they think they can guess what the next phase will be because they know the entire history from Babylon to Louis Kahn. They couldn't be more wrong if they tried! Because the most important factor in the next phase is not the whole history of architecture but everything that is going on in the world at the precise moment when a new architecture is produced. It's fine by me if people know everything about history with the idea of actually using it! But it isn't the most important thing. What you need to get a grip on is the fact that in our time with its enormous production of images and its technological processes, people are exposed to a bombardment of information. The result of all this is a new notion of the whole visible reality. It should be clear then that the architecture of the future will hardly be influenced at all by what we have now. The thing that interests me is the poetry of a situation and finding a meaning in a context of plurality. I am not someone who loves what is pure to the exclusion of what is impure; I love them both. I love everything. I make conceptual architecture. Architecture has to be conceptual. In our office we don't make the drawings first; the first two weeks we have discussions and these, of course, take the form of words. If we could say in words what we wanted to make then the project would in fact already be finished. Do you see what I am getting at?

On the other hand, the piece of architecture may start with words, but the words are the first thing that gets forgotten. What remains is the architecture. The most irritating thing in my view is to talk too much about architecture, because words have a very arbitrary relationship with architecture. You need to forget the words because the architecture will say it with other means. For me words are part of a personal way of working, that isn't interesting to anyone and isn't interesting for architecture either. All it is is the material momentum of my thought processes.

While we are on this subject, what do you think about the heteronymy of the ideas that go to make up the design of a building and the facts accomplished that modern society presents us with? The dissolution of what was intended in the actual result?

This brings us to a highly philosophical discussion about the historical and economical inevitability of buildings, their affective content and their discourse which can totally be wiped out by events. I think myself that architecture must have, will have to have, a transcendent dimension over and above all that. It will have to be able to adapt to the greatest and most catastrophic changes, even if only in its references. It is a good thing if you can picture your building as it would be in a situation of neglect or mutilation, of violence being done to it, of an extreme alienation from its goal. Buildings to which the most terrible things have happened can be just as astonishing and emotionally charged as an architecture that has always been perfectly maintained and cared for. We have to accept the whole paradoxical relation between the partially unfulfilled aspirations of a building and what actually happens to it in reality.

Like a singer who never knows precisely how his voice sounds?

Yes, that's it; it's the relation between what is intended and the actual result, the proportion of what was not achieved to the element that was fundamental. Is that all you can do, taking small steps or avoiding risks? Architecture is in any case so much a form of applied art that for that reason if for none other you cannot avoid the necessity of costing your building according to social and functional requirements. And with these requirements all kinds of other aims and messages creep in, some of them recognised but others that are often hidden.

But there are also elements in the design that the architect can turn at his own discretion into a hidden sign or message, that can only be decoded by his equals. The architect's own ideas may be quite shocking or subversive, as long as they are not expressed openly. The architect writes a sort of text consisting of different levels and the most personal of these can only be read between the lines.

If you look at the filmic quality of architecture, what sort of film do you think of?

I see the contemporary film director as a sort of architect. He has to put forward a draft plan that may or may not be accepted. There are administrative, financial, technical and organisational considerations. In a short period of time he has to bring a large team of people together in one place. But there are other similarities as well. In what I call the architectural substratum we experience the influence on time and space of the filmic aspect. The camera moves through a series of tableaux, puts a frame round the action, sheds various sorts of light on it. All this helps me in designing a building, when I am thinking of how one enters it and moves from one room to another, the meetings that take place and how one leaves it. This 'scenography' of the building is more than just the decor; it is a sort of play in itself. Take the IMA, for instance, for me this was a design based entirely on the idea of movement forward. As far as the 'editing' of the textures is concerned, if it isn't film, it is in any case video. In this respect architecture stands at the cross-roads of a whole variety of influences.

Can architecture ever be have such a potential for subversion as, for instance, the films of Godard?

Not to the same extent. Because a film by Godard usually doesn't cost very much and has no difficulty in reaching a large group of admirers. Godard is widely known as a *gosse d'art*, as the naughty boy of film. And once a film like that is finished and shown to the public, then it does at any rate exist. But a building, this has first of all to go through the whole social procedure. It has to be built, and then it needs to be used. Buildings where the conditions of the commission are eccentric are actually highly exceptional. Some of Gaudi's projects are a good example of this: they are subversive, provocative even crazy.

It is your aim to be subversive?

No, but I do aim to be dynamic. The only thing I want is to crystallise a single moment in all its diversity in a single place. As an architect you can never turn everything upside-down; at any rate, that's true of my way of working.

Even so, by using the currently popular baroque means of architecture, you would seem to want to comment on the institutional aspect of the relation between design and programme. For instance in the Media Park in Cologne.

The Media Park is reasonably accessible as a project and can definitely not be described as heroic. It was actually a 'faster' project than most of the other projects I have worked on. The aim was to conceive of a programme that would be just as readable by night as by day. This was possible with the aid of various devices, amongst them the Potemkin screen, but with holes in them.

Broadly speaking the idea of a programmed building that you can see the life going on in and in which the typical images give you a clue as to what the whole building is like, this idea is typical of the average business quarter at the present day. The difference in my case is that I work a little faster than those people who all pay more attention to their 'image'. The Media Park is more a way of crystallising those aesthetic experiences that are connected with reading a computer screen; these can be beautiful without, for instance, it being possible to take photos of them. It is a question then of recreating a completely different scale, an aspect

of architecture that is extremely illuminating and dynamic and that corresponds to one of the typical visual pleasures of today's world. That is why it is a good thing to design something of that sort.

Could you say something more about that?

They are projects that employ a number of means that are not yet very popular but which can profoundly affect the poetry of the city. If there are many buildings of this sort in a single street then they would after a while have a somewhat disturbing effect. That is obvious enough. But if the whole city was like that, then of course the character of the city itself would change and so, in the long term, would one's perception of what a city is.

That means that if your work is repeated often enough it can have a profound influence on one's perceptual equipment. What is left then of that uncritical fascination with fate? Is there anything left that is lasting?

What I've just been describing is an important element in my work but not the only one. The blueprint for the Tour sans Fin in La Défense, for example, is another kind altogether. There you can find more lasting and metaphysical aspects and not just the element of fragility that I mentioned earlier on. But in my architecture the idea of something lasting is not expressed by the form but by the mentality. That's what it's all about. You see, I am very fond of buildings that reveal their fragility and their makeshift character. The thing that preoccupies me is that all buildings can actually be protected only in one way. Not by using granite or reinforced concrete; something like that will at most make a difference of a few years. It is not a matter of civilization surviving. A building must above all be a step in the architectural history of a specific moment of civilization. Only then will it represent something; only then can people feel love for it and that is the basic requirement for permanence. The Katsura architecture in Japan, the Eiffel Tower, however unstable buildings like that are, remain standing because people love them. It is not really important for the walls to be a metre thick. One can of course think up other formulas for success; all I can say is that they're not mine. What I mean by this is that the more institutional a building is, the more it embodies something has to do with the culture, the more it will have an aesthetic value; and whatever the structural state of a building like that, it will be preserved. It should also be fairly obvious that things like that no longer have anything to do with architecture as such.

With an approach like that you disqualify a great number of your colleagues who give priority to autonomous professionalism. You must have many enemies.

That's true. In France, if you aren't a historicist, or a neo-modernist and if you're not a supporter of architecture as an autonomous academic discipline, then you already have two-thirds of the nation against you.

Isn't it strange, however, that an architect who passes for a notorious eclecticist, who always reacts to the specific context, has so many enemies. You might think that an eclecticist would be everybody's friend.

The opposite proves to be the case. Because I have no intention of ever building a historicising or purely modernist building, my architectural handwriting will never easily be accepted by a large group of people, no matter how carefully I respond to the specific character of a site. You see, people are fondest of things that recur all the time. Just think how many followers people have who always make the same things; it is not a coincidence that they get the opportunity to do just that. With my work people generally feel a little ill at ease because in each case they feel forced to adopt a different attitude.

If we apply to your concrete work this question of the difficulty people experience in accepting what you do, the aspect of boundaries or limits is perhaps a good way to begin. It is in fact there that you get the possibility of breaking through the standard patterns of historicism and modernism with their all too familiar physical framework.

It is a matter of how you land in a certain situation. As far as I am concerned I think the most interesting thing is if someone can end up somewhere without having to make a whole series of moves first. Academic architecture always lets you know that you are approaching something somewhere a kilometre in advance. And, sure enough, in the end you do end up somewhere. As for myself I'd like to be inside somewhere immediately. This also brings us to the notion of an interface; all one has to do is to go through a screen. The boundary has become virtual and that also has something to do with being tactile. My plan for a Tour sans Fin in La Défense has something to do with that, but only lengthwise. The project on the Boulevard Raspail is another case in point. You simply cannot tell where the building begins and where it ends; you can see the sky through it. Inside you see trees growing. It is difficult to decide which is the real entrance because you enter the building at least three or four times. At one time you go through the screens; then you pass through an eight-metre high glass door. Meanwhile you still think you are outside. And suddenly you are in the lift; once again this is made of glass. You don't even know that you are in a lift, until it starts to move. What I mean to say by this is that the whole problem of boundaries is actually first and foremost a problem of interference. It is a question of the deeper meaning of a building or a space, of the whole way in which one perceives the structure and routes that with the help of the interface can be eliminated. This means that the boundary becomes increasingly virtual. In many of my projects you enter from below like a space ship. The door in the sense of a door-tool is physically eliminated. You take an escalator and suddenly disappear. There is no more door, only flowing movements.

There is yet another dimension that is important and that is ubiquity, being everywhere at once; this has to do with the wonder one feels for the faculty of perception as a function of speed. In the project in Nogent sur Marne, for a night-club, this is very relevant because an extensive video system has been installed there. Inside and outside are simultaneously present; what is more, our eyes see both the reality and the film. In the end you no longer know where you are. The space has become virtual because all that one sees is in fact a space which people imagine they have made their own. It is still of course a matter of the layout of the terrain and the interconnections, but no longer of the space in the mathematical sense of the word. Or rather, the whole aesthetic system of the building is a system that exists outside the boundary.

Then, of course, there is the question of how the building is seen from outside, from a car or a plane, by daytime or at night. And if one thinks about these matters of perception, one will have to admit that the meaning of architecture changes. These are questions that have everything to do with present cultural and technological developments. I do not relate to the idea of an actual apocalypse, but I am definitely fascinated by visions like that of Baudrillard about the fatality of things having us in its power. That's also why, despite all attempts at devising a context and a programme, I think that you still have to hold onto the autonomous power of something that continues to make sense, even in a situation where the context is totally subverted so that the opposite happens from what one had planned. This field of tension can be seen very clearly in the IMA where because of a lack of financial resources the building hasn't been cleaned for four years even though a million visitors have passed through it. I could never have dreamed of something like that. The thing that is so interesting about this is that despite all the objective evidence of decay, the building continues to have a certain dignity and appeal.

Isn't it actually much more interesting to speculate on the field of tension between your own cultural relativism on the one hand and Arab absolutism on the other that still apparently manage to be reconciled in your architecture? If architecture wishes to participate in the

cultural debate, this sort of tension is a rewarding theme, because it is something like this that enables us to see that architecture belongs within the realm of culture and not outside it. What is more, when you look at it from the architect's point of view, he or she is also just another ordinary citizen and as such is a potential participant in the democratic discussion about the options, the possibilities and the specific needs of our society.

No, as an architect I can't answer that. As an architect you can't carry the problems of the human race, or all the international problems on your own shoulders. It's simply more than I can bear! Of course as an ordinary citizen I'll be only too pleased to talk about these things at the bar of the Café de Commerce, but as an architect that's not my problem. Political questions like racism and integration, economic and financial matters, in as much as they have any relevance to my work, are more than I can be expected to cope with. And that's just as well. We are only just beginning to put the period behind us when we were all traumatised by architects who wanted to explain the world and to lay down sets of rules for achieving Utopia. I'm for architects having a completely different role. Every cultural attitude is potentially a critical one, although I believe that there have been times when that made more sense than it does in our time. At present in my opinion it's a question first and foremost of the hope that the political attitude essentially implied. I mean hope in a broad sense and not in the sense of some notion of progress. I've got nothing against a situation where a number of architects get directly involved with politics out of a desire for change. I am also delighted when more people come up with a principled attitude to their city or to architecture that invests them with a certain authority to influence decisions. It's also a good thing when architecture gives voice to its own point of view from its privileged position as a social intersection of interests. All that's well and good. But when all is said and done, your influence as an architect lies in the power of your proposals and your designs. Or even in a statement that is in some sense poetic in character. When a building has actually been erected and is provocative through the simple fact that it continues to remain standing, it begins to engage in a form of criticism that is much more effective than any story on paper whatsoever. There is a power in reality and people realise this all too little. The architects who have the most to tell are the ones who actually build.

This interview is also published in A.D. and Archis.